



Ancient Philosophy

Plato's Concept Of Justice: An Analysis

D.R. Bhandari
J.N.V. University

ABSTRACT: In his philosophy Plato gives a prominent place to the idea of justice. Plato was highly dissatisfied with the prevailing degenerating conditions in Athens. The Athenian democracy was on the verge of ruin and was ultimately responsible for Socrates's death. The amateur meddlesomeness and excessive individualism became main targets of Plato's attack. This attack came in the form of the construction of an ideal society in which justice reigned supreme, since Plato believed justice to be the remedy for curing these evils. After criticizing the conventional theories of justice presented differently by Cephalus, Polymarchus, Thrasymachus and Glaucon, Plato gives us his own theory of justice according to which, individually, justice is a 'human virtue' that makes a person self-consistent and good; socially, justice is a social consciousness that makes a society internally harmonious and good. According to Plato, justice is a sort of specialization.

Plato in his philosophy gives very important place to the idea of justice. He used the Greek word "Dikaisyne" for justice which comes very near to the work 'morality' or 'righteousness', it properly includes within it the whole duty of man. It also covers the whole field of the individual's conduct in so far as it affects others. Plato contended that justice is the quality of soul, in virtue of which men set aside the irrational desire to taste every pleasure and to get a selfish satisfaction out of every object and accommodated themselves to the discharge of a single function for the general benefit.

Plato was highly dissatisfied with the prevailing degenerating conditions in Athens. The Athenian democracy was on the verge of ruin and was ultimately responsible for Socrates's death. Plato saw in justice the only remedy of saving Athens from decay and ruin, for nothing agitated him in contemporary affairs more than amateurishness, needlesomeness and political selfishness which was rampant in Athens of his day in particular and in the entire Greek world in general. In addition, Sophistic teaching of the ethics of self-satisfaction resulted in the excessive individualism also induced the citizens to capture the office of the State for their own selfish purpose and eventually divided "Athens in to two hostile camps of rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed. "Evidently, these two factors amateur needlesomeness and excessive individualism became main targets of Plato's attack. The attack came in the form of the construction of an ideal society in which "Justice" reigned supreme, since Plato found in justice the remedy for curing these evils. Thus, we are to inquire in this study the nature of justice as propounded by Plato as a fundamental principle of well-order society.

It is to be noted that before Plato many theories of justice were prevalent. The inquiry about justice goes from the crudest to the most refined interpretation of it. It remains therefore to inquire what were the reasons for which he rejected those views. Thus before discussing Plato's own concept of justice, it is necessary to analyze those traditional theories of justice were rejected by him.

Cephalus who was a representative of traditional morality of the ancient trading class established the traditional theory of justice. According to him 'justice consists in speaking the truth and paying one's debt. Thus Cephalus identifies justice with right conduct. Polemarchus also holds the same view of justice but with a little alteration. According to him "justice seems to consist in giving what is proper to him". The simple implication of this conception of justice may be that "justice is doing good to friends and harm to enemies." This is also a traditional maxim of Greek morality.

The views propounded by Cephalus and Polemarchus were criticized by Plato. The view point of Cephalus was criticised on the ground that there may be cases in which this formula may involve the violation of the spirit of right and his formula does not admit of being taken as a sound universal principle of life. It is not right to restore deadly weapons to a man after he has gone mad. And the contention of Polemarchus was condemned by Plato on the ground that it was only easy to speak of giving good to friend and evil to enemies. But if the friends only a friend in seeming, and an enemy in reality, then what will happen? Then under such circumstances whether we should rigidly follow the definition and do him good or we may use discretion and do him evil? But to do evil to anybody, including one's enemy was inconsistent with the most elementary conception of morality. Thus, this conception of justice regulated the relations between individuals on individualistic principles and ignores the society as a whole.

Thrasymachus who represented the new and critical view, propounded the radical theory of justice. He defines justice as "the interest of the stronger". In the other words, might is right. For while, every man acts for himself and tries to get what he can, the strongest is sure to get what he wants and as in a state the Government is the strongest, it will try to get and it will get, whatever it wants for itself. Thus, for Thrasymachus justice means personal interest of the ruling group in any state or we can further define it as "another's good". Laws are made by the ruling party in its own interest. Those who violate such laws are punished because violation of such laws is treated as violation of justice. Socrates criticises the definition of justice given by Thrasymachus and he says just as a physician studies and exercises his power not in his interest but in the interest of a patient, the Government of any kind shall do what is good for the people for whom it exercises its art. But Thrasymachus advances some more arguments in support of his concept of justice and injustice.

An unjust is superior to a just in character and intelligence.
Injustice is a source of strength.
Injustice brings happiness.

Socrates attacks these points of Thrasymachus and throws light on the nature of justice.

Justice implies superior character and intelligence while injustice means deficiency in both respects. Therefore, just men are superior in character and intelligence and are more effective in action. As injustice implies ignorance, stupidity and badness, It cannot be superior in character and intelligence. A just man is wiser because he acknowledges the principle of limit.

Unlimited self-assertion is not a source of strength for any group organized for common purpose, Unlimited desire and claims lead to conflicts.

Life of just man is better and happier. There is always some specific virtue in everything, which enables it to work well. If it is deprived of that virtue, it works badly. The soul has specific functions to perform. When it performs its specific functions, it has specific excellence or virtue. If, it is deprived of its peculiar virtue, it cannot possibly do its work well. It is agreed that the virtue of the soul is justice. The soul which is more virtuous or in other words more just is also the happier soul. Therefore, a just man lives happy. A just soul, in other words a just man, lives well; an unjust cannot.

At this juncture the new point of view is stated by Glaucon and he put Forward a form of what was later to be known as a social contract theory, arguing we are only moral because, it pays us or we have to be. Glaucon describes the historical evolution of the society where justice as a necessity had become the shield of the weaker. In the primitive stage of society without law and government, man was free to do whatever he likes. So the stronger few enjoyed the life at the sufferance of the weaker many. The weaker, however, realised that they suffered more injustice. Faced with this situation they came to an agreement and instituted law and government through a sort of social contract and preached the philosophy of just. Therefore, justice in this way something artificial and unnatural. It is the "product of convention". It is through this artificial rule of justice and law that the natural selfishness of man is chained. A dictate of the weaker many, for the interest of the weaker many, as against the natural and superior power of the stronger few.

Plato realises that all theories propounded by Cephalus, Thrasymachus and Glaucon, contained one common element. That one common element was that all the them treated justice as something external "an accomplishment, an importation, or a convention, they have, none of them carried it into the soul or considered it in the place of its habitation." Plato prove that justice does not depend upon a chance, convention or upon external force. It is the right condition of the human soul by the very nature of man when seen in the fullness of his environment. It is in this way that Plato condemned the position taken by Glaucon that justice is something which is external. According to Plato, it is internal as it resides in the human soul. "It is now regarded as an inward grace and its understanding is shown to involve a study of the inner man." It is, therefore, natural and no artificial. It is therefore, not born of fear of the weak but of the longing of the human soul to do a duty according to its nature.

Thus, after criticising the conventional ideas of justice presented differently by Cephalus, Polymarchus, Thrasymachus and Glaucon, Plato now gives us his own theory of justice. Plato strikes an analogy between the human organism on the one hand and social organism on the other. Human organism according to Plato contains three elements-Reason, Spirit and Appetite. An individual is just when each part of his or her soul performs its functions without interfering with those of other elements. For example, the reason should rule on behalf of the entire soul with wisdom and forethought. The element of spirit will subordinate itself to the rule of reason. Those two elements are brought into harmony by combination of mental and bodily training. They are set in command over the appetites which form the greater part of man's soul. Therefore, the reason and spirit have to control these appetites which are likely to grow on the bodily pleasures. These appetites should not be allowed, to enslave the other elements and usurp the dominion to which they have no right. When all the three agree that among them the reason alone should rule, there is justice within the individual.

Corresponding to these three elements in human nature there are three classes in the social organism-Philosopher class or the ruling class which is the representative of reason; auxiliaries, a class of warriors and defenders of the country is the representative of spirit; and the appetite instinct of the community which consists of farmers, artisans and are the lowest rung of the ladder. Thus, weaving a web between the human organism and the social organism, Plato asserts that functional specialization demands from every social class to specialize itself in the station of life allotted to it. Justice, therefore to Plato is like a manuscript which exists in two copies, and one of these is larger than the other. It exists both in the individual and the society. But it exists on a larger scale and in more visible form in the society. Individually "justice is a 'human virtue' that makes a man self consistent and good: Socially, justice is a social consciousness that makes a society internally harmonious and good."

Justice is thus a sort of specialization. It is simply the will to fulfill the duties of one's station and not to meddle with the duties of another station, and its habitation is, therefore, in the mind of every citizen who does his duties in his appointed place. It is the original principle, laid down at the foundation of the State, "that one man should practice one thing

only and that the thing to which his nature was best adopted". True justice to Plato, therefore, consists in the principle of non-interference. The State has been considered by Plato as a perfect whole in which each individual which is its element, functions not for itself but for the health of the whole. Every element fulfils its appropriate function. Justice in the platonic state would, therefore, be like that harmony of relationship where the Planets are held together in the orderly movement. Plato was convinced that a society which is so organized is fit for survival. Where man are out of their natural places, there the co-ordination of parts is destroyed, the society disintegrates and dissolves. Justice, therefore, is the citizen sense of duties.

Justice is, for Plato, at once a part of human virtue and the bond, which joins man together in society. It is the identical quality that makes good and social . Justice is an order and duty of the parts of the soul, it is to the soul as health is to the body. Plato says that justice is not mere strength, but it is a harmonious strength. Justice is not the right of the stronger but the effective harmony of the whole. All moral conceptions revolve about the good of the whole-individual as well as social.

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